

# **CORAM DEO: A SPIRITUALITY OF WORK**

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## **Spiritually Exhausted**

The temperature plunged as I entered a local ice rink here in San Diego. The instant switch from sunshine and palm trees to seeing my own breath was refreshing.

And that's when I spotted her: a woman on white figure skates wearing a sweatshirt with these telling words across the front: spiritually exhausted. The young adult who offered this self-assessment certainly seemed bright and capable enough. But she was registering a protest against the soul-diminishing aspects of her daily grind.

I happen to be acquainted with this young woman. I've spoken with her, and know that the chief cause of her sense of spiritual depletion is her day-in-day-out work experience. In terms of satisfying the deeper longings of her soul, her employment situation is a wasteland. At least that's how she perceives it. And she is not alone. Whether or not we would wear that sweatshirt, we all understand the depleted state it describes.

I've been there myself. It's different from just being tired. It goes deeper. The fatigue we experience after working long hours can usually be addressed by taking breaks, by a good night's sleep or a vacation getaway. But spiritual exhaustion is a more serious and persistent challenge.

We can be simply overwhelmed by the apparent futility of it all. The words of Shakespeare in a soliloquy from Macbeth seem true: Life's but "a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more."

What would it take to turn such negative feelings around? What would it take for any one of us to become revitalized and rejuvenated in our working lives? Given the messy realities of the workplace today, is it realistic even to hope for such a thing?

We dare to believe that it is. The solution, however, requires more than just finding a new job. We need inner reorientation. We need a spirituality that can sustain and reenergize us in our work.

## **Revisiting Mary and Martha**

If our working lives as Christians are to be re-invigorated, we will need, for starters, to rethink the famous New Testament story of Mary and Martha.

Perhaps no text has evoked as much debate over the relative value of work than this story from Luke's Gospel. The two sisters are hosting Jesus and his entourage, and meal preparations are underway. While Martha works feverishly on them, Mary sits at Jesus's feet, taking in all that he has to say. When Martha complains to Jesus about her sister's negligence of her domestic

duties, Jesus response with an affirmation of Mary's priorities. "Mary has chosen what is better," he explains.

Typically, this story has been used through the centuries of the Christian tradition as a basis for treating the so-called spiritual or contemplative life as superior to the so-called active life. We have been encouraged to be like Mary, in her relational intimacy with Jesus, and not like Martha, who was busy doing things for the Lord.

This line of interpretation was reinforced by Platonism, a Greek philosophical system that influenced early Christianity. It underscored the superiority of a reflective, contemplative life over a life of action and industry. The biblical story of Mary and Martha was interpreted through this lens as a cautionary tale about the dangers of a focus on work. Most Christians ever since have assumed that our devotional practices are more important than our work. And not only that, we have come to assume that what goes on in our working lives remains more or less separate from the so-called spiritual dimension of life.

Yet we have always felt sympathy for Martha and her example of thankless service, and wondered if the rebuke she received was perhaps a bit harsh. Here is a recent poem that captures our ambivalent feelings. It's written from the perspective of Martha:

### **Martha**

Our whole lives I have grounded her,  
been the roof separating her from the sky.

She could spend hours dreaming  
her way to the well, clay jug  
waiting to be filled.

They say, now, that I was wrong.  
That while I braided the bread,  
my sister's undone hair was her salvation.

I stood in the doorway,  
watching her anoint his feet, perfume  
glazing my clean floor,

and thought how badly  
they need us – the hands that pour  
for the lips that drink,

the careful scaffolding  
for their irresponsible miracles.

This poem may help us re-evaluate the story of Mary and Martha. Its real message is not that the contemplative life is always superior to the active. It is meant, rather, to caution us against a

distracted, frenzied preoccupation with our work that pushes the presence and voice of Jesus to the very margins of our consciousness.

After all, Scripture is filled with exhortations to act on our convictions, to imitate the God who does things, and to follow the heart of this God into the world as doers of the word and not just hearers of it. We must remember that it was Jesus himself who said, "My food—my spiritual nourishment, what keeps me going, and energizes me—is to do the will of him who sent me, and to finish his work."

Ultimately, we are not to pick between these two sisters but to combine what they represent. The spiritual attentiveness of Mary is to be integrated with the good service of Martha in such a way that our work becomes holy endeavor.

### **Coram Deo**

"A spiritual life," Evelyn Underhill has written, "is simply a life in which all that we do comes from the center, where we are anchored in God: a life soaked through and through by a sense of His reality and claim, and self-given to the great movement of his will."

Yes, the spiritual life is indeed one that is anchored in God. It expresses itself in unselfish efforts to advance God's purposes in the world. And it encompasses all that we do. It is about living all of life—not just some esoteric portions of it—before God.

Ancient Christians developed a profound little Latin phrase to describe how the Christian life was to be lived: *Coram Deo*. The simple phrase meant that the Christian life in all its dimensions was to be lived before God.

There is, of course, a sense in which every life is already entirely before God and exposed to his all-knowing gaze. But to live all of life before God means more. It means that we welcome this unseen presence of God. We intentionally align ourselves with this great immaterial reality so that we experience what has been aptly described as the "with God" life. We choose to keep company with God.

For Christians this *is* the spiritual life. When it comes to our work, it means that we will expend our energy and pursue our endeavors *Coram Deo*—before God.

### **The Adventure Begins**

One of my all-time favorite statues is of Ignatius Loyola, and I discovered it some years ago at a retreat center in Ontario, Canada. A fierce wind is blowing, and Ignatius is clutching his cloak around him to keep it from tearing away. But the most striking feature of the life-sized bronze statue is that he is leaning into the wind, with his head tilted slightly to one side. You see, Ignatius is listening to the wind, which symbolizes the Spirit of God. He is trying to discern what the wind is saying, so that he can follow its leading.

And so the adventure begins. You see, a “with God” working life involves more than a comfortable companionship. After all, the one we have invited into our lives is none less than the Lord of life. In that role he inevitably makes claims upon us. We are no longer in charge. A “with God” working life requires us to relax our tight grip on the trajectory of our careers. From this point onward, we adopt the attitude of the young boy Samuel in the Bible story. Hearing the voice of God, he responds: “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”

To enter into a vocational journey with God means that we are embarking on something over which we no longer have complete control. That is risky but it is never boring. And so we must be willing to exchange the security we try to manufacture for the adventure he promises.

### **The Fear of Ordinariness**

“All this sounds very exciting,” you may be thinking. “But I am inadequately equipped to be a world-changer. I’m simply too ordinary. My contribution will be at best a blip on the screen.”

I know how you feel. An acquaintance of mine is a gifted theologian who writes faster and is more sought after than I am. He was invited to speak at a session of the prestigious American Academy of Religion, and I decided to attend in support. As his presentation began, I whispered to a colleague next to me: “The speaker up there is a personal friend of mine.” But from the very beginning, I found my friend's remarks and attitude strangely irritating. As usual, he was brilliant, but I began making sarcastic asides under my breath, offering a series of unsolicited and petty criticism. Some things I said were downright mean-spirited. Finally, my colleague sitting next to me turned and looked me right in the eye. “Did you say that the speaker was your friend?”

His words hit me like a shovel on the side of the head. My envy was exposed, and the conviction was overwhelming. The moment the speech was over I stood up and headed straight back to my hotel room. I knelt down beside my bed and wept out my confession to God. Underlying my jealousy was fear that my relative ordinariness left me without value and might disqualify me from a truly useful life.

The way out of this darkness was to grasp in a deep way that God's love embraces me despite my being unspectacular. The other thing is that God's perfect will is always discovered within the boundaries of our actual abilities and limitations. It is never discovered through frantically overreaching ourselves.

We can use the gift we have, *and* accept their relative size. It's liberating when we realize that we can put our energy into fulfilling use of our gifts, such as they are. Instead of trying to be someone or something we're not, we can give our attention with joy to the task of being all we were meant to be.

With God in the equation, as someone has written, “Even the most commonplace things are tinged with glory.”

## **Useful Rather Than Conspicuous**

“But what if nobody notices my work?”

This is a fair question, and it leads to another: What is the heart motive that fuels our work? Is it meaning? Significance? These have their place. But if we go back again to Scripture, and probe the hearts of the earliest Christians, we discover something else. “We make it our goal,” wrote the Apostle Paul, “to please him.” Here we are tapping into a great mystery, something intensely relational and deeply personal. Loyalty and gratitude to Christ are meant to anchor our entire working lives.

A side-benefit is that it frees us up from our addiction to peer approval and recognition, for we are performing for an audience of one. It helps us understand how the American theologian Jonathan Edwards could resolve, early on in his illustrious career, to be “useful rather than conspicuous.”

## **Spiritually Renewed**

Christianity is a realistic religion. And that’s why we should never sugar-coat the fact that work remains hard and we still labor by the sweat of our brow.

But there is a way for that young woman back at the ice rink, and others of us like her, to avoid spiritual exhaustion in the midst of these real challenges. It is a way that fuses together the spiritual attentiveness of Mary and the responsible endeavors of Martha. It leads us to conduct all that we do very deliberately *Coram Deo*—before God. And it’s precisely this hidden spiritual relationship that energizes our work and sustains us in the midst of it.

As we live into this adventure, so full of hope for ordinary people, we can make the prayer of Thomas Ken our own:

Direct, control, suggest this day  
All I design or do or say.  
That all my powers, and all my might  
In thy sole glory may unite.